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A Conversation With Alan Guttmacher - Child Health Director Has Background in Genetics

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A LIFE IN MEDICINE Dr. Alan Guttmacher, 60, is a geneticist and pediatrician.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.
- John 5:24

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Dr. Alan Guttmacher, a Harvard-trained geneticist and pediatrician, is the new acting director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the federal agency that finances research into child and maternal health. Dr. Guttmacher, 60, previously worked with Francis Collins on the Human Genome Project and then as the deputy director of the National Human Genome Research Institute of the National Institutes of Health. We spoke for three hours in his Bethesda, Md., offices and then later by telephone. An edited version of the conversations follows.

Q. DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE A PHYSICIAN?

A. I grew up among doctors. My father was a [forensic](#) psychiatrist. His patients included Al Capone and Jack Ruby. My mother is a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Three of my father's four children went into medicine. And my father's twin brother, Alan Guttmacher, was a famous obstetrician-gynecologist. It was all over the family.

When I was still a young man, both my father and my uncle died of leukemia, and that really put me off to the idea of a medical career. I thought, "Spending a life in medicine means watching patients die, again and again. Who would want this?" Eventually, though, I chose [pediatrics](#) because there you get to see the kids grow. In most cases, if you can fend off bad things for long enough, the kids will do fine.

Q. YOUR UNCLE WAS THE PRESIDENT OF [PLANNED PARENTHOOD](#) AND A TOWERING FIGURE IN THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS MOVEMENT. HAS THERE BEEN ANY CRITICISM OF APPOINTING ANYONE NAMED ALAN GUTTMACHER TO THIS POST?

A. I have not been aware of any. The name does stand

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for something. Planned Parenthood was more of a social movement until my uncle said, "If we're making all these decisions, we need to make sure that it is backed up by good scientific information." So he started the think tank that became known as the Guttmacher Institute. One finds that people know the name primarily because of that. But people on both sides of the [abortion](#) debate tend to use their data as the reliable data. So, to some degree, my appointment has been less controversial than some might think.

Q. HOW DID YOU GET YOUR UNCLE'S NAME?

A. He and my father were [twins](#). All of Alan Guttmacher's children were girls. So my father made this gesture. They were incredibly close.

Q. YOUR INSTITUTE FINANCES CONTRACEPTIVE RESEARCH. IS THERE MUCH NEW WORK HAPPENING IN THIS AREA?

A. I think so. For 2009, N.I.C.H.D.'s funding for research on reproductive health totaled more than \$254 million. We've been supporting a number of studies on the basic biology of ovulation. Understanding ovulation may lead to knowledge about why it sometimes fails to take place. That could eventually lead to fertility treatments or new ways to halt ovulation.

Also, we've been funding research into [contraception](#) for men. N.I.C.H.D. has supported research targeting ion channels to interfere with sperm motility. There are other projects on temporarily shutting down sperm production in the testes. Still yet another project is attempting to interfere with the sperm's ability to find the egg.

Something currently in clinical trials involves shutting down sperm production. Unfortunately, the method also shuts down [testosterone](#) production. So you'd have to get replacement hormones. Would a significant number of men be willing to go to their doctors every few months for testosterone shots or implants? And will manufacturers be convinced that enough men would do that, to make it worth their while? Time will tell.

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SOURCE: [The New York Times](#)
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